

Corps Commanders in Blue: Union Major Generals in the Civil War

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Review

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Rafuse, Ethan S. *Corps Commanders in Blue: Union Major Generals in the Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780807157022

Recovering and Reassessing Officers of Federal High Command

Once upon a time, offering up a collection of essays in honor of an important scholar or esteemed professor was common, if not expected. That approach has diminished in recent years. But as evidenced by the publication of *Corps Commanders in Blue: Union Major Generals in the Civil War*, edited by Ethan S. Rafuse, the practice is not dead. As Professor Rafuse makes clear in the introduction, the purpose of this volume is to honor long-time Civil War historian Herman Hattaway, which renders the title of this anthology rather misleading.

Indeed, readers drawn to the title might well expect a more comprehensive study of the men who led army corps for the Union, some of whom, by the way, were not major generals. Title aside, though, this anthology contains fine scholarship from an excellent roster of Civil War historians. The eight selections feature the high profile and the obscure, the vaunted and the vilified. Each piece covers a particular aspect of a given corps commander's career, thus readers should not expect a thorough overview of each commander's Civil War tenure.

Clearly, to select eight from the dozens of men who led Federal corps during the war is a tall order. Still, the eight men examined here represent some curious choices. Three of them (George Gordon Meade, Joseph Hooker, and James B. McPherson) are arguably better known as army commanders; two (Joseph K. F. Mansfield and Charles Champion Gilbert) essentially lasted only one battle in the role; one (William B. Franklin) must be considered one of the great disappointments in corps command, while one (Fitz John Porter) remains among the most controversial corps commanders in the war. Only one, (Winfield Scott Hancock), is best known and generally well regarded for his tenure as a corps commander. Not one of these men held a corps command at the close of the war.

Curious though the selections may be, the essays that represent them are quite rewarding. John J. Hennessy provides a fresh look at the sad case of Fitz John Porter, whose court martial and dismissal from the army for his role in the Second Battle of Bull Run remains one of the enduring controversies of the conflict. Hennessy argues that Porter's own conservative philosophies on how the war should be conducted and often-inappropriate behavior proved just as damning to his career as did his loyalty to George McClellan in an army ravaged by political rivalry.

Although he exercised command of the Federal XII Corps for only forty-eight hours before he was mortally wounded during the Battle of Antietam, Joseph Mansfield is worthy of more than the historical footnote to which he has been relegated, according to Thomas G. Clemens. This thoughtful essay provides an overview of Mansfield's four decades in the regular army, his brief Civil War experience, and the circumstances that led to his promotion to command the troubled XII Corps.

The most curious inclusion is Kenneth W. Noe's treatment of Charles Gilbert at Perryville. A bizarre set of circumstances led to Gilbert's promotion from regular army captain to brigadier general of volunteers and temporary corps command, but his poor performance during the Kentucky crisis doomed his reputation. His promotion was never confirmed; reverting to his permanent rank, he performed provost duties for the rest of the war.

Christopher S. Stowe provides a survivor's tale of sorts in discussing George Gordon Meade's corps command in the Army of the Potomac and how his ability largely to avoid the political interference and internal conflict that plagued the army positioned him ultimately to command it.

In his fine contribution, Steven E. Woodworth highlights the importance of personal relationships in Civil War armies. As he points out, much was expected of James B. McPherson, who finished first in his stellar West Point class of 1853. While McPherson certainly contributed to the success of the Vicksburg Campaign as commander of the XVII Corps, he benefitted mightily from the nurturing leadership of U. S. Grant.

If much was expected of McPherson, perhaps even more was expected of William B. Franklin, who never lived up to those lofty expectations while

exercising high profile commands in the East. Given another chance at corps command in the Trans-Mississippi, Franklin became one of the many casualties of failed 1864 Red River Campaign. Mark A. Snell's revealing essay, however, focuses on Franklin's often overlooked positive contributions that may well have saved the Army of the Gulf from destruction.

"Fighting Joe" Hooker is the subject of editor Rafuse's contribution. Like Franklin, Hooker found a second chance in the West following his disastrous turn as head of the Army of the Potomac. After a starring role in the federal victory at Chattanooga, he commanded the largest corps in the Union advance on Atlanta. And while he performed well in battle, his ego, insubordination, and a failure to grasp political realities caused him to run afoul of William T. Sherman. Passed over for command of the Army of the Tennessee following McPherson's death, he resigned to live out the war in obscurity.

Due in part to his conspicuous role in the Battle of Gettysburg, Winfield Scott Hancock is perhaps the most identifiable Union corps commander and as such has garnered much admiration. But, in the collection's final essay, Brooks D. Simpson offers a welcomed reassessment of Hancock's leadership during the 1864 Overland Campaign. While Simpson notes that Hancock's II Corps was heavily—perhaps too heavily—engaged in some of the most brutal fighting of the war, he finds that the general's performance suffered. Overburdened and hampered by his unhealed Gettysburg wound, Hancock was good but not great.

Despite its misleading title, *Corps Commanders in Blue* showcases some fine scholarship and provides some intriguing topics. Its real value comes in two forms. One is the obscure nature of several of the essays, solid glimpses at overlooked or long forgotten soldiers like Gilbert and Mansfield, for example. The second comes in the fresh interpretations offered, especially of Porter, Franklin, and Hancock. Anyone interested in the Federal high command during the Civil War will find this collection quite valuable.

David Coffey holds a Ph.D. from TCU. He is professor of history and chair of the Department of History and Philosophy at the University of Tennessee at Martin, where he offers classes in US, military, and Mexican history. His books include John Bell Hood and the Struggle for Atlanta; Soldier Princess: The Life and Legend of Agnes Salm-Salm in North America, 1861-1867; and Sheridan's Lieutenants: Phil Sheridan, His Generals, and the Final Year of the Civil War. He is a co-author of Historic Abilene: An Illustrated History. Additionally, he

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